



Exploring children's difficulties with language and literacy

Research and intervention

Narr:

Dr. Susan Ebbels is a Speech and Language therapist who works with children who have Specific Language Impairment. We asked her what she sees as the relationship between research and intervention in this field.

Susan:

I think ideally there should be quite a close relationship between research and intervention and practice and I think it's coming but I don't think it's there yet. I think in the past there's been quite a big gulf, so research has been going on in the universities with not too much awareness necessarily of what is actually happening on the ground and intervention and clinical practice has been going on with very little regard for what's happening in the research world. I think that is, that is changing now. You have to prove that what you do works, therefore you need research to show that the interventions that you're doing works.

Most of the research that has happened to date is more about what the problems are in specific language impairment and what the key difficulties are and this does inform intervention, because if you know what the key areas of difficulty are you can work on those. If that then improves that actually then informs the theoretical research because if you base an intervention on a theory and the intervention therefore works, that maybe also mean that the theory also works. If you base an intervention on the theory and the intervention doesn't work that may mean that the theory's wrong. It may not. I may just mean that the implementation of the intervention was not right.

There is still a rather limited body of research on intervention, especially for the older age groups. The majority of the intervention research is with pre-school children and comes from The States, and involves much higher levels of intervention than is usually available in this country, but that is, that is changing. There are more studies being done now on intervention with across the age range including school-age children, but an awful lot more is needed. We still can't say with any certainty that okay this child has a problem with this and is with x and is this age therefore I should do this kind of intervention. We're nowhere near that yet. There are a few studies on each area with a particular age group, and some of them haven't worked and some of them have, so there's an awful lot to do, but I think that the research community is now becoming more aware that intervention actually can be a very strong way of proving your theory.

In terms of carrying out research on intervention for SLI, I think it does need to be 'this project is looking at this particular intervention for this particular kind of problem within SLI for children who have been identified to have a problem in that area'. If you include all children with SLI and it doesn't work you don't know whether it's because you had too many children. That's the problem with some of the studies in the past. There have been a few studies, which have said basically - is speech and language therapy effective for children with language impairments? It's far too broad. The children with language impairments have a whole range of problems. The speech and language therapy they're given is very varied, so I think we need much more specific studies. So, yes, so looking at this area and identifying children who have a problem with this area I'm going to do this kind of intervention and see if that works, and I think that's how it needs to be done, from the bottom up. I don't think you can do big broad studies saying - does therapy for children with a language problem work? It's like saying - does visiting your GP make you better? It's just far too broad.

Narr:

We asked Susan about Professor James Law's review of the literature on the effectiveness of intervention for children with primary speech and language delay.

Susan:

Well, the main finding of James Law's reviews was that we don't have enough evidence which I would certainly agree with, particularly in the area of comprehension, which as I say I think is actually one of the most important areas, so that's something we, somewhere we really need to, research really needs to focus on. It did help show that we do have evidence that speech and language therapy is effective for expressive language impairments and also phonological impairments and speech impairments so it is useful to have reviews which pull together all of evidence. Hopefully it means that more funding will be available for those areas where we haven't got any reliable evidence as to what does and doesn't work, but even within the areas of expressive language and phonology where the finding was that it looks like therapy does work, the question isn't again, it shouldn't be – does therapy work? It should be – does this kind of therapy work? with this kind of child and that kind of child? So it mustn't ask questions which are too broad I think or you'll get a negative answer.

Narr:

So what sorts of interventions does Susan see as being most effective?

Susan:

I've personally done some projects looking at improving children's grammar, both comprehension and expressive language and have found that, this is with older children with SLI from the age of ten upwards with specifically teaching them the rules of English grammar and giving them a visual way of seeing that and showing them the rules using a system of sort of shapes and colours can really help them but its almost like teaching them a second language, so its not the normal way that a child would learn English, but if you have failed to learn it by the time you're ten you're not going to learn it in the normal way, so especially if you'd had lots of intervention as well, so I have found that that, that system has really helped some of the children particularly the ones who have stronger visual skills as well and have got fairly good general IQ, although I have actually found quite good effects with a child with lower IQ as well, but where there's a really big gap say between their general ability and their language abilities.

The other area that we've had quite good success is in the area of word-finding difficulties where we found that teaching children to think more about the meanings of words and the sort of associated meanings of words has helped them to retrieve the words better and has improved their word finding abilities. So, those are sort of specific studies that we've carried out. There are other areas that I feel have worked but I haven't got proof because we haven't carried out any studies and a recent study we carried out was looking at comprehension of texts and the children who had the intervention improved a lot and it was very successful but in that study we had a control group and the control group also improved so that makes you think – well was it the therapy that led to the improvement?

Probably not, because the control children didn't have that therapy and they also improved, so it was probably everything else that's going on in their lives, or doing the same test twice, so the other areas that I feel have worked with children I've worked with, where I could say this individual child has improved from this to this I can't say for definite is what I did with them that worked, that's why you need controlled intervention research to say for definite that something worked. There's certainly lots of areas that I feel work and would be worth investigating but I don't know for certain.

Narr:

Finally, we asked Susan to share her thoughts about effective ways for classroom teachers to support children with SLI.

Susan:

If a class involves a child with a language impairment then I think there are some key strategies that education staff can use which would help all of the children in the class, which is to provide as much visual support as possible, to give instructions in very short chunks, several short chunks is much better than one big long instruction. Things like visual timetables can help them understand what's happening in the day and the teacher can keep referring

back to that. Providing enough time to allow them to respond as well so that they can take an active part in the class because a child who has an expressive language problem may find it quite difficult to put their sentences together and they need to feel they've got lots of time to express themselves.